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ABSTRACT

Educational researchers should expand their methodology to include the student's voice and to consider the impact of the student's environment when defining being "at-risk of failure" or "at-risk of dropping out of school." Current definitions of who is at-risk place the onus of at-riskness entirely within the student. Researchers have approached the notion of at-riskness from an epidemiological framework, which results in definitions based on characteristics of populations and which fail to regard individual voices within those populations. Several scholars, however, have attempted to alter the current trend of framing at-riskness from the epidemiological model. Educators and researchers need to acknowledge the importance of the environment as a factor in being identified as at-risk. Grounded in systems theory, at-riskness can be conceptualized as a set of cogs or spheres (representing the external factors of sociocultural, community, schooling processes, and family) with the internal factors of the student in the center. These spheres can rotate at different rates as the intensity of the interaction of the student with various external factors change. Such a model may add to the present conversation on defining and determining who is at-risk. (Contains 15 references and a figure illustrating a conceptualization of at-riskness.) (RS)

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Running Head: DEFINING THE AT-RISK STUDENT:

Defining the At-Risk Student:
Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations

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Defining the At-Risk Student:
Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations

In the past two decades, researchers have generated a significant amount of literature on the subject of students whom they define as "at-risk of failure," or "at-risk of dropping out of school." Some researchers estimate that 20 million school-aged children fall into the category of at-risk (Catterall & Cota-Robles, 1988). Similarly, Levin (1985) claims that nearly one third of the children in America's schools are educationally at-risk. Clearly, a population of this size warrant s considerable concern for educational scholars. Further, research should focus on appropriate and beneficial ways to improve the quality of education for students whom educators perceive to be at-risk; I do not question this approach. However, what I question is how scholars are determining who is at-risk, and how they are defining this population. If I examine the literature from that angle, some significant observations emerge. For example, Frymier (1992) writes, "Comprehending who is at risk and what they are like can be ascertained only by studying teachers' perceptions of children and the information teachers have about each child" (p. 49). There is no doubt that this is one *possible* avenue for generating knowledge about students, but is this the *only* method?

A brief review of additional literature reveals that scholars also define at-risk students based upon a series of factors external to the student (i.e., socioeconomic background, single parent family, etc.). In addition, another set of defining characteristics includes internal student behaviors (i.e., low self-esteem, low motivation, etc.). Again, it is not this researcher's claim that these are invalid tools for determining at-riskness. However, I argue that these should not be the *only* tools. As Winborne and Dardaine-Ragguet (1993) stated, "A major shortcoming of many studies in this area [at-risk research] is the apparent disregard for viewpoints of children targeted in the research" (p. 195). The purpose of the present essay, then, is to suggest that researchers give at-risk populations that voice or "regard." In short, I propose that research expand its methodology to include the students' voice and to consider the impact of the student's environment when defining at-riskness. In the essay that follows, I review briefly previous literature on defining and determining who is at-risk, provide a possible model for conceptualizing at-riskness, and end with questions for future research.

Current Definitions

The following is a brief sample of how scholars and educators are currently defining who is at-risk:

> 1. "At-risk students are defined as those who fall behind, whose school attendance is uneven, whose basic skills are limited, who are bright but bored, who are in trouble with the juvenile authorities, who are on drugs, who are pregnant, who have failed the district competency exams, who are behavior problems, who speak English as a second language, or who reflect a depressed socio-economic status" (Hardy, 1989, p. 38).
>
> 2. "The at-risk student has been identified as those students who come to school at-risk of failing . . . or at-risk of not succeeding at school . . . from unstable, fractured families, low socio- economic status, and ethnic or minority membership" (Blount & Wells, 1992, p. 21).
>
> 3. In 1988, Congress defined the term "at-risk" as: "[T]he term "at risk" means students who, because of learning deficiencies, lack of school readiness, limited English proficiency, poverty, educational or economic disadvantage, or physical or emotional handicapping conditions face greater risk of low educational achievement and have greater potential of becoming school dropouts" (Frost, 1994, p. 131).

Though each definition references various aspects and traits of the at-risk student, each also has one glaring similarity: the onus of at-riskness rests entirely within the student. That is, characteristics of the student, whatever s\he brings into the schooling environment, determine at-riskness. These definitions do not consider what already exists in the environment. I continue with a discussion of specific factors used in defining at-risk.

External Factors

As should be evident from the examples above, a significant amount of research discusses at-riskness in terms of external factors the student brings into the schooling environment. Blount and Wells (1992) state, "The classic identifiers of children who will be at-risk coming into school are children from unstable, fracture families, low socioeconomic status, and ethnic or minority membership" (p. 21). According to this framework, researchers label these types of students at-risk despite other factors. What is more important, the student is at-risk even before s/he enters school, and we continue to label the student as such throughout the schooling experience. Not only does the student lack control and a voice in determining if s/he is labeled as at-risk, s/he appears unable to change that label.

Researchers have traced the origins of this definition to the field of medicine, and specifically to epidemiology (Johnson, 1994; Frost, 1994; Presseisen, 1988). Johnson (1994) wrote, "An epidemiological, medical, disease, or child-deficit model of educational risk assumes that the causes of children's failure in school reside primarily, if not exclusively, within the child's physical being" (p. 37). Other problems associated with an epidemiological model include stigmatization from negative labeling, an inability to predict future school performance, and, significant to the present essay, a failure to consider individuals *within* the at-risk population (Frost, 1994). In short, when researchers approach the notion of at-riskness from an epidemiological framework, they base their definitions on characteristics of populations (i.e., children from disadvantaged homes) and fail to regard individual voices within those populations.

Internal Behaviors

Research also suggests that a student's internal characteristics or behaviors are valid predictors of being at-risk. For instance, a student's level of self-esteem will have an influence on how s/he performs in the schooling environment (McWhirter et al., 1994; Mirman, Swartz, & Barell, 1988). A low degree of motivation also appears to place students at-risk (Hardy, 1989; Nunn & Parish, 1992). Darling and Abrams (1989) offer the following set of noncognitive variables that may improve African-American students' chances for success in the college environment: positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understanding and coping with racism, preference for long-range goals, availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experience, demonstrated community service, and knowledge acquired in a field. Though the majority of these factors are oriented externally, several are internal to the students' psyche. Finally, an external locus of control also seems to influence students toward at-risk categorization (McMillan & Reed, 1994; Nunn & Parish, 1992). Students with an external locus of control fail to see causal relationships between their behaviors and possible outcomes. In short, observing students' internal characteristics or behaviors can assist educators in determining which students are at-risk. Again, however, because researchers make these observations from an external perspective, they fail to involve the student's voice and consider the impact of the student's environment in characterizing at-riskness.

Changing Methods

Several scholars, however, have attempted to alter the current trend of framing at-riskness from the epidemiological model. For example, Johnson (1994) chooses to approach the subject of at-risk students from an ecological perspective. Johnson (1994) claims that "such a perspective assumes that ultimately and most usefully student failure must be understood as the consequence of child-environment interaction" (p. 38). Based on systems theory, this approach argues that researchers should determine degrees of at-riskness by the "goodness of fit" or interaction between environmental factors and student characteristics. Dunst (1993) has also proposed an alternate approach toward defining at-risk characteristics. Dunst's (1993) primary claim is that contrary to present assumptions, the absence of what scholars now label "risk factors" does not equate positive development of the student. To satisfy this apparent disregard, Dunst (1993) proposed a list of risk and opportunity factors to determine at-riskness. By allowing for opportunity factors and weighing them against corresponding risk factors, researchers can determine more accurately which students fall into the category of at-risk.

Conceptualizing At-Risk

Clearly, suggestions from the reviewed literature are steps toward good pedagogy. Scholars need to consider how the child's internal and external factors increase the chances of placing him/her at-risk in the schooling environment. Further, educators need assistance, through definitions and researched characteristics, in determining what constitutes at-riskness. However, I argue that what the student brings to the classroom is not necessarily the entire origin of the problem, such as these definitions might suggest. I subscribe to a more holistic perspective, one that acknowledges the importance of the environment as a factor in this relationship. I appreciate Johnson's (1994) ecological approach, where the researcher defines students at-risk as those ". . . who experience or may subsequently experience counterproductive and discordance exchanges with their environments" (p. 38). Here, Johnson places the emphasis on the "exchanges" or relationships students have with their worlds. What the student brings into the situation is obviously significant; equally significant is the environment the student enters. The "goodness of fit" that Johnson refers to is especially vital. I agree with the idea that determining whether a student is at-risk depends on how that student's internal characteristics "fit" with the external demands of the environment. Therefore, borrowing from Johnson (1994),

I might define a student at-risk as "someone who is not experiencing positive interactions with his/her environment due to a poor fit between internal characteristics and environmental demands."

Grounded in systems theory, Figure 1 is a visual representation of this researcher's conceptualization of at-riskness. One essential aspect of this model is its dynamic nature, which is not present in Johnson's (1994) approach. Each shape represents either the student's internal characteristics or those of the particular environment the student comes into contact (external). Further, each shape is something similar to a "gear" or "cog" which is in motion and always changing. The teeth of each gear attempt to mesh with the teeth of the other gears. Consequently, if the student does not have "a good fit" with one or more of the different environments, the gears do not mesh, they stop, and disrupt the entire system. That area, where the teeth mesh, is precisely where the potential for at-riskness exists. Again, I emphasize that the objects are revolving and the teeth are continually changing due to changes in the student and the environment. This element illustrates the interdependence between the student and the various environments.

Another significant aspect of this model is that the speed at which the spheres rotate does change. The change in speed signifies a change in intensity for the student. For example, imagine that the student's family is of greater concern to him or her at one point in time. To illustrate this concern, that particular sphere rotates at a different speed (faster) than the other spheres. Because the family is now of greater intensity, the student focuses more attention there. Consequently, the student is focusing less attention elsewhere (such as in the classroom) and may be at-risk because of this interaction. Again, what the student brings into the system is clearly important. Equally important is the environment the student enters and how these various characteristics and demands mesh with each other.

Conclusions

In the present essay, this researcher has presented and discussed current literature on the subject of at-risk students. Further, this researcher has argued that while the status quo of defining who is at-risk has validity, scholars should consider alternate methods as well. That is, researchers should consider what impact the student's environment plays in determining at-riskness. How the student interacts with his/her various environments is significant. To

illustrate this idea, this researcher also presented and discussed a model of at-riskness. In short, it is my hope that this model will add to the present conversation on defining and determining who is at-risk in our schools.

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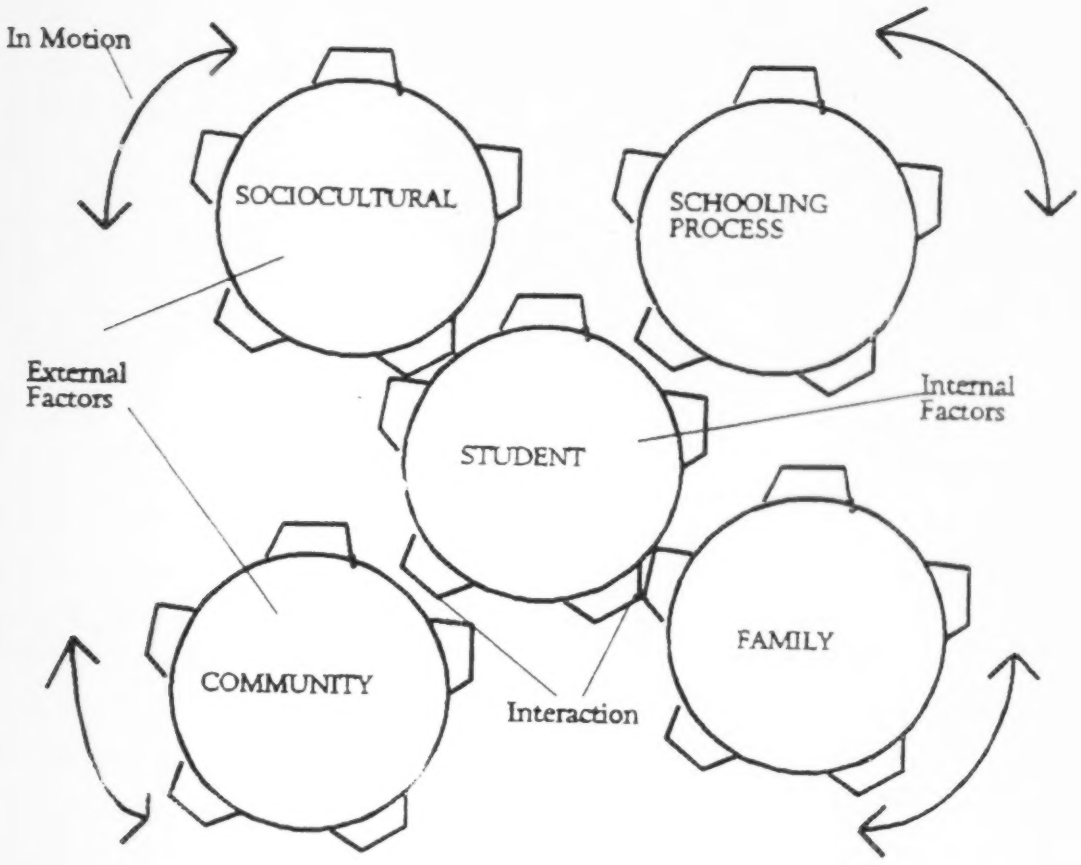
Figure 1 At-Riskness Conceptualized



Basic Assumptions:

1. Everything is in motion.
2. The speed of motion will change depending on degrees of intensity.
3. Changes in intensity will result in changing interactions.
4. Changing interactions may result in being at-risk.